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CHAFEE BILL WOULD HELP PREVENT GROUNDWATER CONTAMINATION FROM LEAKING STORAGE TANKS

***Bill Designed to Reduce Pascoag-Type Contaminations;
Includes Funding for Remediation/Cleanups***

WASHINGTON, DC – U.S. Senator Lincoln Chafee today introduced legislation – the Underground Storage Tank Compliance Act of 2001 – to help prevent groundwater contamination caused by leaking underground storage tanks. The bill also includes funding for cleanup of contaminated sites, such as Pascoag, Rhode Island.

“Communities across the nation have suffered from our failure to prevent underground tank releases,” Chafee said. “Gasoline and fuel additives, such as MTBE, have contaminated groundwater and rendered it undrinkable. The Village of Pascoag, Rhode Island is just one town among many that has suffered from MTBE contamination that can be traced to leaking underground storage tanks.”

Chafee continued. “For months, residents of Pascoag have been unable to use the water supply for drinking, bathing, or cooking. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are being spent to dilute the water with Harrisville’s water supply, to install water filtration systems, and to bring new wells on-line. Additional money will have to be spent to clean up the contamination and to hold accountable the owners of the leaking tanks.”

“The General Accounting Office has identified several critical shortcomings in the otherwise largely successful storage tank regulation program. This legislation would fix those shortcomings by mandating increased inspections, more training for tank operators, and more money for program administration and for the cleanup of contaminated sites. This bill will help federal, state, and local officials prevent the kind of leakage and contamination that has so drastically affected the lives of everyone in Pascoag,” Chafee concluded.

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Leaking Underground Storage Tanks (USTs)

In 1984, Congress enacted legislation requiring underground storage tanks to meet minimum federal requirements for leak detection and prevention standards. In 1988, owners and operators of existing underground storage tank systems were given a ten-year window to upgrade, replace, or close tanks that didn't meet minimum federal requirements for spill, overfill, and corrosion protections. As the deadline passed on December 22, 1998, many underground storage tanks failed to meet the federal standards.

Last year, Senator Chafee joined Senator Bob Smith (R-NH) in asking the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) to assess the compliance of USTs with federal standards. In a May 2001 report, the GAO concluded that only 89 percent of tanks meet federal equipment standards. The GAO also reported that only 71 percent of tanks were being operated and maintained properly. The report cited infrequent tank inspections and limited funding among the culprits for these low percentages.

Underground Storage Tank Compliance Act of 2001

The UST Compliance Act of 2001 would require the inspection of all tanks every two years, while increasing federal emphasis on training of UST operators. The legislation emphasizes compliance of tanks owned by federal, state, and local governments, and provides \$200 million for cleanup of sites contaminated by MTBE. Finally, the legislation provides increased funding to administer the federal UST program, which the GAO has identified as critical piece of the solution.

The bill is cosponsored by Senators Jim Jeffords (I-VT) and Bob Smith (R-NH), Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, as well as by Senators Tom Carper (D-DE) and James Inhofe (R-OK).

MTBE

Earlier this year, Senator Chafee voted in favor of legislation -- the Federal Reformulated Fuels Act (S.950) -- that would ban the use of methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE) as a gasoline additive. MTBE, an oxygenate added to gasoline to reduce air pollution, has polluted groundwater in communities across America. The strong taste and smell of MTBE can render water supplies unusable, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has stated that MTBE is a possible carcinogen.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A copy of the GAO report -- "Environmental Protection: Improved Inspections and Enforcement Would Better Ensure the Safety of Underground Storage Tanks" (Report Number: GAO-01-464) -- can be viewed on the GAO website at: <http://www.gao.gov>.

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